SILENT HOMILIES

Little Treasures

THE MARRIAGE THAT WAS ALREADY THERE

The Quiet Regularisation of Love



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A little book for couples who discover that the Church is asking them to put a marriage in order.

Before You Begin

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You may have been married for twenty years before anyone used the word convalidation. Then a priest says that something still needs putting right.

It can hurt. This little book is for the cup of tea after that conversation. It is not a canon-law manual, and it is not a talk about how lovely marriage is. It is an attempt to say, in ordinary words, what the Church is asking, and what she is not asking.

If you are afraid that the last twenty years have just been declared nothing, start with the first chapter and do not skip the chapter about the children. If you only have ten minutes, read the chapter that asks whether Father can simply bless you. The rest can wait until the kettle boils again.

Your parish will have its own papers and its own timings. Where the answer depends on your case, this book says so. A priest should be able to put it in your hands without having to correct it afterwards.

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Chapter 1

But we are married

†

You may have been married for twenty years before anyone used the word convalidation. Then a priest says that something still needs putting right, and the room goes quiet. One of you is embarrassed. The other is already defending the life you have lived. That is a very ordinary beginning.

"Father, are you telling me our marriage wasn't real?"

No. That isn't what I'm saying. The years happened. The children happened, if you have them. The mortgage, the hospital nights, the arguments about money, the decision to stay when leaving would have been easier: none of that is being rubbed out. What we do need to talk about is what the Church means by marriage, because for a Catholic that word is doing more work than the civil register.

The conversation often starts somewhere else. A daughter wants a church wedding, and the form asks where her parents were married. A grandmother is asked to be a godparent, and the same question appears. Someone comes back to Confession after thirty years and mentions, almost in passing, the hotel. The priest goes quiet for a moment, not because he is shocked, but because he can already see the question that is about to hurt.

The word itself is worth saying once, in plain English. Convalidation means making valid what was not valid. It is not a second honeymoon, and it is not an admission that you have been play-acting. It is the Church's ordinary way of receiving a consent she was not there to receive the first time, or of removing an obstacle that made the first attempt fail.

Some couples stay away for years because they expect to be scolded. A decent priest is more likely to be glad you came. He has had this

conversation before. He knows the pause after he asks where you were married. If you can stay with that pause, the rest of this book is an attempt to say, slowly, what is actually being asked.

A Reflection

There is usually something on the fridge by the time this question arrives. A school photograph. A reminder about parents' evening. A magnet from a place you went when the children were small. None of it is waiting for a canon lawyer.

That is why the conversation feels so strange. The life is already furnished. The Church is not asking you to pretend the house was empty. She is asking whether the promise that holds the house was made in the way Christ asks his Church to receive a promise.

You don't have to like the question tonight. You only have to hear that it is a question about the promise, not a verdict on the years.

A short prayer

Lord, you saw the years. Help us hear what still needs saying. Amen.

Chapter 2

The wedding was real

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People say, “We already had a wedding. Why do we need another one?” It is a fair question. You stood there. You meant it. There were witnesses, a register, perhaps a meal afterwards that cost more than you had. Nobody in the parish office should talk as if that day was a piece of theatre.

In civil law you are married. The mortgage company thinks so. The school thinks so. Your children have never thought anything else. The Church does not ask you to go home and tell them that none of it counted. What she asks is a narrower question: did that day bring a marriage into being in the sense she means, for a Catholic?

Validity is a cold word, so it is worth translating. It means the act did what a marriage is supposed to do. It established the covenant. A beautiful day can miss that. An untidy day can have it. Feeling married, and being married in the Church’s sense, are related, but they are not the same test.

If neither of you was Catholic, the Church will usually recognise the marriage you made in your own serious way, provided you were free to marry. A wedding in a Methodist church, a civil wedding of two people who were never baptised, a marriage in another religion: these are not swept aside and called nothing. The Church has never taught that only a Catholic wedding is a real marriage.

The difficulty comes when at least one of you is Catholic, or was baptised Catholic, or was later received into the Catholic Church. Then she asks something more. Not more feeling. A form. The promise is to be made before a priest or deacon who is authorised, and two witnesses, unless the bishop has dispensed from that and allowed another public way. Miss that, and the day can be entirely sincere and still not be a canonical marriage.

So when a husband says, "I stood there and meant every word," the priest should not brush the sentence aside. Meaning it matters. For a Catholic, meaning it still had to be said in the Church's way, or with her permission to say it somewhere else.

"Are you saying we've been living in sin?" Not in the way that sentence is usually thrown. Sin has to do with what a person knew and chose, not only with the shape of the situation. A couple who married in good faith, and were never told the Church required anything else, are not the same as a couple who knew and set the requirement aside. The situation can still need putting right. Blame is a different question, and it belongs in Confession rather than in a speech.

A Reflection

Two papers can sit in the same drawer. One is the certificate from the town hall. The other, if it exists, is the church record. Families often have the first and not the second, and they only notice when a form asks for both.

The town hall paper did a real job. It gave you a name in law, a protection, a date the children can repeat. The Church is not collecting certificates for the pleasure of it. She is asking whether the promise was also received by the body to which a Catholic belongs.

A drawer is a small place to discover a large gap. It is still only a gap. Gaps can be closed, once you know which kind of gap it is.

Chapter 3

Why the Church gets involved

†

"Why does it matter where we got married? We weren't hurting anyone."

Marriage makes a household, and a household is not a secret. Children arrive, or they don't. Someone becomes ill. Someone dies. The Church is then asked to bury, to baptise, to receive someone back, to say whether this person is free to marry again. She cannot do that honestly if she has no way of knowing who is married.

This is older than the parish office. In 1563 the Council of Trent published a decree known by its first word, Tametsi. Clandestine marriages had become a misery. A man could claim he was married, or claim he wasn't, and a woman could be left with no way of proving which was true. Where that decree was published, a marriage would not be valid unless it was contracted before the parish priest, or a priest he or the bishop had authorised, and two or three witnesses.

The rule did not reach every country at once. In 1907 Pius X issued a further decree, Ne Temere, which took effect at Easter 1908. From then, Catholics of the Latin Church were bound much more widely to marry before their own pastor, or a priest delegated by him, and two witnesses. The point was not to embarrass hotels. It was to make a permanent promise provable, public, and harder to escape.

The Catechism gives the same reasons without the Latin. A sacramental marriage is a liturgical act, so it belongs in the Church's prayer. It creates duties in the Church, not only in the house. Because it is a state of life, the Church needs to be sure it happened. And a promise said in public is harder to walk away from on a bad Thursday.

Scripture already knows marriage as a household the Church can enter. Aquila and Priscilla made tents, travelled, and had a church meeting in their house. Paul calls them fellow workers. Their marriage was not a private hobby alongside the faith. It was one of the places the faith lived. That does not prove a canon. It does show why the Church has never been able to treat a Catholic marriage as nobody else's business.

"Why didn't anyone tell me this twenty years ago?" Sometimes someone did, and said it too quickly to hear. Sometimes the priest who prepared a different wedding never met you. Sometimes a family treated the Church as optional and assumed the register office would do. A late explanation feels unfair. It does not change what a Catholic marriage is.

A Reflection

We already understand this with smaller things. You do not buy a house by mentioning it to a friend in the kitchen. You sign, and someone who is allowed to receive the signature is there. The signature does not create your affection for the house. It makes the handing over real in a way other people can trust.

Marriage is not a house sale, and the comparison fails as soon as we remember that no solicitor can supply the will to give yourself. Still, the public part is not an insult to love. It is how a community knows that love has taken a form it must not casually undo.

Trent was dealing with people who used privacy as a way to escape. The Church's memory of that has not faded, which is why a quiet promise still needs a witness who can be named.

Chapter 4

The promise is the heart of it

†

Here is the sentence that keeps the whole subject honest. Consent makes the marriage. No priest, no bishop, and no registrar can supply it. If it is not given, there is no marriage, however correct the paperwork.

Consent is not a mood, and it is not the feeling you had on the day. It is an act of the will. I take you as my husband. I take you as my wife. I mean a covenant that is faithful and permanent, and open to the children God may give. The old words are still the clearest ones. For better, for worse. Not for as long as it feels like the thing we booked.

There is a prayer in the book of Tobit that says this without any canon law at all. Tobias and Sarah are about to begin life together, and the story has already told us that Sarah has been widowed again and again. Before they come together, Tobias asks her to pray. They ask God to take them in mercy, and they remember that they have not taken a spouse out of lust. It is a small scene, and it is doing a large thing. The promise is being said in front of God before the life begins.

This is also why a wedding in a beautiful church can still be invalid. If one person was forced, or could not know what they were doing, or positively excluded permanence, or fidelity, or children, the consent the Church means was not given. Convalidation cannot paint consent over a gap. Where consent was never there, or was later withdrawn and not given again, there is nothing for the Church to regularise.

Most couples who come about convalidation are not in that place. They meant it. They have lived it. The missing piece is not the will. It is the way the will was received. That is a kinder problem than it first sounds, because a will that has already lasted twenty years is not a small thing to bring to the altar.

The priest is not the one who marries you, not in the Latin Church. You marry each other. He asks for the consent, receives it in the Church's name, and blesses. In the Eastern Catholic Churches the priest's blessing belongs to the form of the marriage in a different way. If either of you is Eastern Catholic, say so at the start. The form is not the same, and guessing helps nobody.

Freedom belongs inside the promise. A marriage made under serious pressure, or accepted to fix a visa, or made on the quiet condition that it can be ended if it disappoints, is not the covenant being talked about here. Most people who come for convalidation are not describing that. They are describing a life they have already stuck at. The priest still has to ask, because he is not allowed to assume.

A Reflection

Two rings on a bedside table do not make a marriage. They sit there overnight because the hands that wear them are washing up, or sleeping, or holding a child. In the morning they go back on, and nobody makes a speech about it.

What the rings remember is simpler than a speech. Two people once said a sentence out loud, and then had to live inside it on days when nobody was dressed for a photograph.

If you say those words again, you will not be insulting the first time you said them in a room the Church could not yet call her own. You will be letting the same will be heard where Christ has asked it to be heard.

A short prayer

Christ, you asked for a yes that could be heard. Receive ours. Amen.

Chapter 5

Why baptism changes the question

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Baptism is the fact that changes the kind of marriage, and couples are rarely told this plainly. You might reasonably ask why a washing received in infancy should decide anything about a wedding at thirty. The answer is that Christ joins the covenant of marriage to the covenant he has already made with the baptised.

Between two baptised people, a valid marriage is a sacrament. That is not a decorative word for a church wedding. Christ takes the covenant of a baptised man and a baptised woman and makes it a sign of his own love for the Church. Paul says as much in Ephesians, when he speaks about husbands and wives and then says he is talking about Christ and the Church. The Catechism adds the practical consequence. In the Latin Church the spouses confer the sacrament on each other by the consent they exchange. Grace is not a religious extra laid on top of an ordinary contract. Where the marriage is valid and both are baptised, the contract and the sacrament are the same reality.

If one of you is not baptised, the marriage can still be a true marriage. The Church calls this a natural marriage. Natural does not mean second-class, and it does not mean merely civil. It means a real covenant of man and woman, with its own dignity, which has not been raised to a sacrament because baptism is missing in one of the spouses. You cannot have a sacramental marriage with a person who is not baptised. You can have a valid marriage, if the impediment has been dispensed and the form observed.

A further thing follows, and it surprises people. If the unbaptised spouse is later baptised, and the marriage was already valid, it becomes a sacrament by that fact. There is no second wedding to add the sacrament

afterwards. Baptism does the raising. Nobody can be pushed into that. A spouse who does not believe is not a project.

Saint Monica married Patricius when he was not a Christian. Augustine says she lived with a difficult man, prayed for him for years, and saw him baptised near the end of his life. That household is not a pattern you are required to copy. It is only a reminder that the Church has been living with this difference since long before parish forms.

A Reflection

The water of baptism is older than the wedding album. Most of us cannot remember it. A parent carried us. Someone else spoke. And yet that washing is what decides whether a future promise can be a sacrament.

It is a strange order. The sacrament we received when we could not consent is what makes a later consent able to carry Christ's covenant. Marriage, which needs two free adults, depends on a gift that came before either of you could choose.

If one of you has never been baptised, that is not a failing to be hurried. It is a fact to be told. The priest cannot guess it from a surname, and he should not try.

Chapter 6

Catholic and Catholic, Catholic and Christian, Catholic and unbaptised

†

These three situations are not the same, and a great deal of worry comes from treating them as if they were. Suppose you were baptised Catholic, and your husband was baptised Methodist. You might reasonably ask why that should make any difference at all, if you both believe in Christ and you both meant the vows. It does make a difference, but not the difference people usually fear.

Two Catholics who marry in a register office, or a hotel, or a garden, without a dispensation from canonical form, do not usually contract a valid marriage. Both were bound to the Church's form. Love does not replace it. If you are both free, the ordinary remedy is to marry in that form now. That is the convalidation a parish priest sees most often.

A Catholic and a baptised Christian of another Church are in a different place. Their marriage is what the law calls a mixed marriage. Permission is normally needed for the wedding to be lawful. Lack of that permission does not, by itself, make the marriage invalid. What still binds the Catholic is the form, unless it has been dispensed. So a Catholic who marries a Methodist in a Methodist church, with no dispensation, is usually not validly married. A Catholic who marries a Methodist before a Catholic priest, with the proper permission, is. The permission and the form are doing different jobs. One concerns lawfulness. The other concerns whether the marriage comes into being at all.

A Catholic and a person who is not baptised are in a third place. This is called disparity of cult, which is an unfriendly name for a simple fact. It is a diriment impediment. Without a dispensation, the marriage is invalid even if it happens in a Catholic church with a priest and two witnesses. With a

dispensation, and with the form, or a lawful dispensation from the form, it can be a valid natural marriage. It is not a sacrament. That is not a judgment on the goodness of the unbaptised spouse. It is the meaning of baptism.

Two people who were never Catholic, marrying each other in their own way, are ordinarily bound by a marriage the Catholic Church recognises, if they were free to marry. When one of them later becomes Catholic, the Church does not cancel the wedding and start again. She receives a marriage that was already there. A blessing may be wanted. A convalidation is not, unless something else made it invalid.

Your priest will need the facts before he can say which of these you are. A recent baptism certificate is asked for because the register knows things the memory has dropped. A husband who can tell you the year of a cup final, and cannot tell you the parish of his baptism, is not a rare husband. The margins also record marriage, and sometimes they record a marriage nobody mentioned at the start of the conversation.

A Reflection

The question that actually sorts these cases is often not the one the couple expect. They think the priest will ask about the flowers, or about whether the first wedding was a happy day. He asks where each of you was baptised.

That can feel like a strange priority when you have come to talk about twenty years of ordinary life. It is the priority because baptism decides what kind of marriage Christ can make of your promise, and the form decides whether the Church was there to receive it.

If you can bring the fact, the priest can find the name for it once he has seen the paper.

Chapter 7

Can't Father just bless us?

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This is the sentence parish priests hear more than any other. "We don't want a fuss. We only want our marriage blessed."

Sometimes that sentence is exactly right. If you are already validly married, the Church can bless you. Two non-Catholics who become Catholic, a couple who married with a proper dispensation in another church, a couple whose only desire is to mark a wedding anniversary: a blessing is a blessing. It does not make the marriage. It asks God to keep what is already made.

Often the sentence is nearly right, and still misleading. If the marriage was invalid for lack of form, there is not yet a marriage for the priest to bless in that sense. What is needed is the consent, spoken again, in the form the Church requires. Holy water on a civil certificate does not do it. A photograph with the parish priest does not do it. A kind word at the end of Mass does not do it.

The part that is easy to miss, because it is quieter than a blessing, is who actually marries you. In the Latin Church the ministers of the sacrament are the spouses. You give the sacrament to each other by the words of consent, if both of you are baptised and free. The priest does not manufacture the marriage. He receives it. That is why his presence matters, and why it is not magic.

So when someone says "bless us", the kind answer is a question. Do you want prayer over a marriage that already exists, or do you need to make the marriage the Church has not yet been able to receive? They are not the same afternoon.

"Will everyone have to know?" The parish register will know, and the parish of baptism will eventually be told, because that is how the Church remembers. The street does not have to know. You do not owe the old wedding guests a second invitation. If you want a quiet Tuesday, say so. A priest who turns it into a show has missed the point.

A Reflection

People understand a blessing. They have seen holy water. They know the gesture. It is harder to believe that two ordinary people, one of them perhaps in the coat they wore to work, can hand each other a sacrament by a sentence.

That is the Catholic claim, and it is a large one. Christ does not stand at the side adding religion to a human arrangement. Where the marriage is valid and both are baptised, he is in the arrangement. The sentence carries him.

A blessing asked instead of that sentence is not a small act of humility. It is simply too small for what you are actually free to do, if the marriage has not yet been received.

A short prayer

Lord, do not let us ask for a smaller gift than the one you are offering. Amen.

Chapter 8

What convalidation actually does

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A marriage can fail to come into being for three reasons only. A diriment impediment. A defect in the consent. A defect in the form. Convalidation is the repairing of one of those. It is not a general Catholic atmosphere added afterwards.

Simple convalidation is the ordinary way, and it is the one most parishes mean. If an impediment made the marriage invalid, the impediment must cease or be dispensed, and consent must be renewed in the way the law requires. If the impediment was public, both of you renew consent in canonical form. If consent itself was missing, the person who did not consent must consent now. If the only problem was the form, the marriage must be contracted again in canonical form. In that last case, which is the common one, you marry. You do not attend a blessing of a marriage you already had.

The new consent has to be a new act of the will about this marriage, knowing or believing that it was invalid from the start. That sounds legal. In the room it is simple. You are saying: I take you, and I know that this time the Church is receiving it. It takes effect when that consent is given in the required way, not from the date on the old certificate. The years are not cancelled. The canonical effects begin now. Children already born are not waiting for this date in order to be your children.

There is another, less ordinary path, called radical sanation. The easiest way to understand it is to set it beside the ordinary path. In simple convalidation you speak the consent again. In a sanation, the bishop, or in some cases only the Holy See, convalidates the marriage without a new ceremony. He dispenses from the impediment if there is one, and from the form if it was not kept, and the canonical effects are counted back to the

day you married, unless he says otherwise.

He cannot do this if consent was never given, or was later taken back. He should not do it unless you mean to stay married. A sanation can even be granted, for a grave reason, without one of you knowing. It is not the normal parish Saturday. It is a favour, and dioceses differ about when they will ask for it. Your priest cannot promise which path is yours until he knows the facts. If he says he needs to ask the chancery, he is not delaying you for sport.

"Can it be fixed without another ceremony?" Sometimes. That is the sanation. It still needs the truth of your consent, and a bishop who is free to grant it in your case. It is not the cheaper option for people who are shy. It is the extraordinary path when a new exchange of consent is impossible, or would do serious harm. Ask. Do not announce to the family that it has been arranged until the bishop's decree is actually in the parish.

A Reflection

Putting a clock right does not say the afternoon never happened. It says that from now you can trust the hands. Simple convalidation is closer to that. The life continues. The marriage, in the Church's reckoning, begins to be what you have already been living towards.

Sanation is stranger, and it should stay rare in the telling of it. The Church looks back and judges that the consent was already the real thing, and she supplies what her own law had required and not received. She is not pretending. She is using a power she believes she has, sparingly, where a new ceremony is impossible or seriously unwise.

Neither path is a way of calling a non-marriage a marriage because the story is moving. Consent still has to have been there. That rule protects you. It also protects the person who was never really chosen.

Chapter 9

Do we have to have another wedding?

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"I don't want another wedding. We already had our wedding."

You do not have to have another reception. You do not have to have a dress, a car, bridesmaids, a band, or a photograph in a local paper. The Church has never taught that validity depends on a marquee. What she does ask, in a simple convalidation for lack of form, is the marriage itself. The questions. The consent. An authorised priest or deacon. Two witnesses. The record.

That can be a Tuesday at ten o'clock, with the church otherwise empty. It can be during Mass, if that is right for you, or without a Mass. A nuptial Mass is a beautiful setting when both of you are free to receive Communion. It is not a condition. The same rings will do. So will no rings, if they were lost years ago. You may invite the children, or only the witnesses. You may tell the wider family afterwards, or before. None of that is canon law. It is manners, and nerve, and the kind of household you are.

Cana is useful here, because it was not a perfect wedding in the way magazines mean. They ran out of wine. Mary noticed before the stewards did. Jesus was there as a guest, in a room full of relatives and a practical embarrassment. The Church has always read that day as more than a kindness with drink. The Lord enters an actual wedding, with its shortage and its family, and the ordinary crisis becomes the place where his glory is seen. A Tuesday convalidation is not Cana. It is the same kind of room: real people, a real shortage, and Christ not waiting for the arrangements to be impressive.

You will be asked for papers. A recent baptism certificate, because the parish of baptism keeps the notes. Evidence of the civil marriage. The

names of any previous spouses. Proof of freedom, which sometimes takes longer than the ceremony. Preparation varies. Some dioceses ask for a conversation even with a couple who have been married for decades. That can feel absurd. It can also be the first time anyone has explained what you are actually about to do. Your priest will tell you what this diocese asks. Another diocese may ask something slightly different.

"Do we need another wedding dress?" No. "Can we do it quietly?" Usually, yes. "Do the children need to be there?" Only if you want them there, and if they are old enough for it not to frighten them. "Why do you need a new baptism certificate?" Because the old one in the sideboard does not show what has been written in the register since. A marriage, an ordination, a previous attempt: the margin is where the Church looks.

If one of you refuses the ceremony, simple convalidation usually cannot happen, because the consent has to be given. A sanation is sometimes requested. It is not owed, and it is not always possible. The priest will not invent a third path to keep the peace at Christmas.

A Reflection

The witnesses often do not know where to stand. They have been to weddings. They have not been to this. Someone points, quietly, at a line in the register. A pen is borrowed. Outside, the traffic is the same as it was at half past nine.

There is a freedom in that plainness. You are not competing with the day you had at twenty-three. You are doing the thing that day could not do, if the Church was not there to receive it. Flowers are allowed. They are not what makes the marriage.

Afterwards you go home and wash up in the same sink. That is not a disappointment beside the church. It is the life the promise was always for.

Chapter 10

What if one of us was married before?

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Say this at the beginning, not at the end. A previous marriage changes the conversation, and hiding it does not make it smaller.

Civil divorce dissolves a civil bond. It does not, by itself, dissolve a marriage the Church holds to be valid. Jesus is blunt about this in Mark and Matthew. The person who divorces and marries another commits adultery, if the first marriage was a real one. The Church did not invent that severity in a tribunal. She is trying not to lose his words. If the first marriage was valid, you are not free to marry again while that spouse is alive. A convalidation cannot be built on top of a bond that is still there. The bishop cannot give permission to ignore it.

A declaration of nullity is not Catholic divorce. It is a judgment, after inquiry, that a valid marriage was not brought into being, even though a wedding happened and life followed. The tribunal does not end a marriage. It says, if the evidence holds, that the marriage people assumed was never actually contracted in the way marriage requires. Some cases are granted. Some are not. "Annulled" is not a service you book.

Not every previous marriage needs a full tribunal case. If you were Catholic and married outside the Church without a dispensation, the parish may be able to complete a lack-of-form case. That is documentary. It is not an automatic rubber stamp, but it is not the same process as a full nullity. If the previous marriage was between two non-Catholics, the Church may well regard it as valid. "My first spouse wasn't Catholic either" does not settle the question. It often makes the marriage more likely to be binding, not less.

A first marriage that lasted six months in 1987 still matters after thirty years with someone else. Length is not what makes a marriage. Consent is.

Tell the priest the name, the date, the place, and whether that person was baptised, if you know. He would rather hear it on the first visit than discover it in a margin the week before the ceremony.

"My first marriage lasted six months. Why does that matter after thirty years?" Because validity is not a prize for endurance. A short marriage can be a real one. A long companionship can be missing the bond. The tribunal, or the lack-of-form papers, exist so that nobody has to guess which is which from the kitchen.

A Reflection

A short first marriage and a long second life sit awkwardly in the same memory. People want the long life to have won. Sometimes, in mercy, the inquiry finds that the first consent was never really marital. Sometimes it finds that it was, and the long life has to be lived in the light of that.

The cruelty would be to pretend the question is unkind, and then leave you to discover it from a form. The kinder thing is to ask it while there is still time to ask it properly.

Bring the date, even if you have tried not to remember it. The priest can carry the category. He cannot carry a fact you have not told him.

A short prayer

Lord, you know the marriages we do not know how to describe. Lead us to the truth of them. Amen.

Chapter 11

What about the children?

†

This fear should be answered in a sentence, and then explained. The Church is not declaring your children illegitimate.

The word itself belongs to an older legal world, and it frightens people for good reason. Canon law says that children conceived or born of a valid or putative marriage are legitimate. A putative marriage is an invalid one celebrated in good faith by at least one of you. A declaration of nullity does not make children illegitimate. Convalidation is not a verdict on them at all.

They were born of your care. They learned to walk in that house. None of that is provisional until a priest signs a book. If anyone in a parish speaks as though your children are a problem to be regularised, that person has misunderstood the Church they think they are defending.

What can happen, and it is often how this subject appears, is that a grandparent is asked to be a godparent and the form asks about their marriage. The Church asks a godparent to be a Catholic who is living in a way that fits the role. An unresolved marriage may mean the priest cannot accept that person as a sponsor yet. That is not a punishment of the baby. It is a limit on an office. It is also, very often, the moment a couple finally come to see him. Good. Better then than never.

You do not have to announce the convalidation to the school. You may want to tell adult children, because secrets in families have a way of arriving at the wrong meal. That is prudence, not law. Some children are relieved. Some are confused and need the same sentence you needed. The years were real. This puts the promise where it belongs.

A Reflection

The school photograph does not become less true because a register was missing. Look at the faces. They are not waiting for a canonical category.

What they may need, later, is a true account. Not a speech about nullity. A plain one. We loved each other. We were married in law. The Church asked us to speak the promise in her hearing as well, and we did.

Children can bear a plain account. They find it harder to bear a fog, especially if they overhear the wrong half of a phone call.

Chapter 12

What about Holy Communion?

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People often want the marriage put right because they want to receive Communion again. That desire is a good thing. It should not be answered with a slogan.

Holy Communion is the sacrament of a body that is in communion. If you are living as husband and wife in a marriage the Church cannot yet recognise, there is a real difficulty. You cannot say Amen to the whole of Christ's covenant and, at the same time, remain in a state that contradicts the part of it that concerns marriage. This is not the priest being severe. It is the Eucharist being itself.

The situations are not equal, and this is where people often get confused. A couple whose only obstacle is lack of form, and who are preparing to marry in the Church, are not in the same place as a couple who have a living spouse from a marriage the Church holds to be valid. In that second case the Church cannot recognise the new union. Saint John Paul II said so plainly in Familiaris Consortio, and the Catechism still says it. The way back to Communion, while the first bond remains, is ordinarily a way of life that does not contradict the bond, unless a tribunal finds the first marriage null, or the first spouse has died.

Pope Francis has asked pastors to accompany people in these situations and not to hide behind a desk. Accompaniment is not a second law. It does not mean every case ends at the altar rail. So do not decide this from a website, including this one. Go to the priest. Tell him the truth, including the previous marriages. Confession is part of coming home, not an exam you pass by using the right phrase. He can tell you what is possible now, and what waits until the marriage is convalidated or otherwise resolved.

After a true convalidation, the obstacle that came from the invalid marriage is removed. If something else is in the way, that is a different conversation, and he will know. If your spouse will not take any step, you are not abandoned. You are in a harder place, and the priest has to say so. Wanting Communion is not a reason to invent a validity that is not there.

A spouse who is not Catholic often cannot see why any of this is his business. He meant the vows. He has kept them. The honest answer is that he is not being asked to become Catholic. He is being asked, if he is willing, to say again, in the form the Church can receive, a promise he has already been living. If he will not, the priest cannot force him, and you should not try to.

A Reflection

There is a particular stillness in the pew when other people go forward and you stay. It can feel like a verdict on the years. It isn't. It is a sign that something public is still unresolved.

The staying can be honest. So can the going forward, when the priest has told you that the way is clear. What cannot be honest is deciding the question by how much you want the answer to be yes.

Christ is not absent from the pew you remain in. He is the reason the pew and the altar belong to the same room, and the reason the unresolved promise matters enough to wait.

Chapter 13

The quiet wedding nobody saw

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Some of the truest weddings in a parish are the ones the parish does not notice. A Tuesday. The heating not quite on. Two witnesses, one of them a neighbour who can get away from work. The couple have been married, in every way their street understands, for twenty-seven years.

They are embarrassed. They think the priest is fitting them in. He is. He is also doing one of the things he was ordained to do. Receiving a consent the Church has waited for is not a gap in the diary. It is the diary.

The words are the same words said by people in white who have known each other for eighteen months. That does not make the words smaller. It makes them heavier. You already know something of the worse. You are still saying the better. Nobody from the old reception needs to be there. The parish register will know. God is not informed by the size of the congregation.

If you want a Mass, and you are both able to receive, ask. If you want the shortest honest form, say that. A priest who insists on a spectacle has forgotten what the sacrament is. Afterwards you may go for a sandwich, or back to work, or home to let the dog out. The marriage the Church can now name is the marriage you drive home in.

A Reflection

There is a photograph from the first wedding, if you still have it. The clothes date it. The hands are smoother. You can put it in a frame now without feeling that the frame is a lie.

The frame does not improve the photograph. It stops it curling in a drawer. Convalidation is a little like that, and the likeness should not be pushed. A frame does not make the people married. The words do. But the instinct is right. Something precious was already in the house, and it needed a place where it would not be lost.

The rings are often the same. The hands are not. The difference does not have to be performed as a sadness. It is simply the time in which the promise has already been keeping you.

A short prayer

Lord of the ordinary day, receive what we say when almost nobody is watching. Amen.

Chapter 14

When convalidation isn't the answer

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A good priest will tell you when this is the wrong door. Convalidation is not a remedy for every hard marriage, and it is not a consolation prize.

If a previous marriage is still presumed valid, convalidation cannot begin. The first work is the inquiry, or the acceptance that you are not free. If consent was never given, no bishop can supply it. If one of you refuses every form of regularising, the other cannot convalidate alone. A sanation is sometimes considered, and sometimes the law will not allow the bishop to grant it. An impediment reserved to Rome, or an impediment of divine law that has only now ceased, is not a parish favour.

There are rare dissolutions the Church believes she can grant, and they are not annulments. The Pauline privilege concerns two unbaptised people, one of whom is later baptised, when the unbaptised spouse will not live peacefully with the new faith. What is sometimes called the Petrine privilege is a dissolution, reserved to the Holy See, of a marriage in which at least one party was unbaptised. These are not routes you choose because a tribunal looks slow. They are narrow, and the facts have to fit. Mention the baptism of a former spouse. Then let the priest see whether the door exists.

If you are already validly married, you do not need convalidation. You may want a blessing, or to have the marriage noted, or to become Catholic yourself. Those are good desires. They are not the same process. And if what you need is not a wedding but help to separate, or to stay safely, say that. The Church's teaching on indissolubility has never meant that a person must remain in a house where they are being destroyed. Separation is sometimes the moral path. It does not, by itself, free you to marry again.

A Reflection

Mercy is not a second set of rules kept in the desk for difficult people. It is the Church staying in the room when the first hope turns out to be the wrong shape.

You may leave the presbytery with a different question from the one you carried in. That is not a failure of the visit. It is the visit having told the truth. A false date in the diary would have been the failure.

There is still a next step. It may be a tribunal. It may be a conversation with the spouse who will not come. It may be Confession, and a way of living you did not expect to be asking about at your age. None of those is a small thing, even if it is not the Tuesday you hoped to book.

Chapter 15

Without beginning again

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Let us return to the kitchen table. The papers are ready now. You have your baptism certificate, your marriage certificate and a date agreed with the priest. You may have waited a long time for this moment. Now it is finally coming.

You might feel a little nervous, or even embarrassed. Perhaps you are wondering why all this is necessary after so many years together. That is understandable. The Church is not asking you to forget the life you have shared. She is simply asking you both to make your marriage vows in the way the Church requires.

On the day, the husband reaches for his wife's hand. He has reached for it in hospitals and in car parks and in the dark of ordinary nights. This time the reaching is also a promise said again, before the Church, in the form Christ has given her to keep. Where both of you are baptised, that promise is a sacrament. Where one of you is not, it can still be a true marriage in the Church's care, and the sacrament waits on a baptism nobody has the right to force.

The Church did not ask you to erase the packed lunches, the overdraft, the funeral of his mother, the year the baby would not sleep. She asked you to bring what could be brought into the order of Christ. The order does not despise the life. It gives the life a promise it can stand on, one that the parish can name, and that you can receive Communion in the light of, once the path is clear.

Then you go home. The keys are the same keys. The dog still needs letting out. That is the marriage that was already there, and the marriage that, at last, the Church can say has been made.

A Reflection

There is no need for a round of applause. The witnesses sign, and the priest writes the names. Somewhere a margin in a baptism register will eventually carry the note, which is how the Church remembers a promise after everyone in the room has died.

You will still have to take the bins out. Grace has never been a reason not to. It has been a reason the person who takes them out is living inside a covenant, not only inside a habit that happened to last.

If you are reading this before the date, you do not have to feel ready in the way a bride is told to feel ready. You have already done the long part. What remains is to say the thing aloud, in the hearing that was missing.

A short prayer

Christ, bridegroom of the Church, receive the promise we are finally able to place in your keeping. Amen.

The questions that actually get asked

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"Why does it matter where we got married?" Because a Catholic is ordinarily bound to marry before the Church, unless she has dispensed from that. It isn't the building that matters. What matters is that the consent is received by someone the Church has authorised, together with two witnesses. A hotel can be a happy room. By itself, it isn't the Church receiving the consent.

"My husband isn't Catholic. Why should he have to do anything?" He doesn't have to become Catholic. If the marriage needs to be contracted in canonical form, he is being asked to say, freely, the promise he has already been living. If he will not, you cannot drag him, and a priest should not suggest that you try.

"We meant our vows. Isn't that enough?" Meaning them is the heart of it, but for a Catholic it is not the whole of it. The Church asks to hear the meaning in her own form, so that the promise is not left as a private memory.

"Can I receive Communion?" Tell the priest the actual history and let him answer for your case. A lack of form that you are about to put right is not the same thing as a second union while a valid marriage still stands. This book cannot give you the answer that belongs to your own case.

"Can the bishop just give permission?" He can dispense from some impediments, and from the form, for a just cause. He cannot dispense from a prior bond, and he cannot supply consent you never gave. Permission does not cover every obstacle. Some things he simply cannot undo.

"What happens if my spouse refuses?" Simple convalidation usually stops there, because consent has to be given by both. A radical sanation is

sometimes asked, and sometimes it cannot be granted. You may still come to Confession. You may still belong to the parish. You cannot be told that the marriage has been fixed when it has not.

"Will the children be illegitimate?" No. That is not what the Church is doing, and a declaration of nullity would not do it either. The chapter on the children is there so you do not have to carry that fear into the presbytery.

"Why do you need a new baptism certificate?" The parish of baptism keeps the record of later sacraments in the margin. A certificate from 1974 cannot show a marriage in 1998. The new one can.

Father, what do we actually do now?

†

You do not have to solve the canon law before you ring. You have to tell the truth, and then let the priest see which door is actually open.

Contact the parish. If you have been away, say so. Embarrassment is normal. It is not a reason to wait another decade. Ask for the priest, not only for a general enquiry about "a blessing", or the wrong appointment may be made.

Tell him the whole marital history. Dates, places, churches, register offices, previous spouses, divorces, any earlier approach to a tribunal. A detail you nearly leave out is often the detail that decides the path.

Say who is baptised, and where, if you know. Catholic, Church of England, Orthodox, Baptist, never baptised: these are different facts. If you are Eastern Catholic, or your spouse is, say that too.

He will usually ask for a recent Catholic baptism certificate, from the parish of baptism, not the parish where you live now. The recent one shows the notes in the margin. He will ask for evidence of the civil marriage. He may ask for decrees absolute, death certificates, or earlier marriage papers.

If there is any previous marriage, say so before you talk about flowers. He will tell you whether this looks like a lack-of-form case, a full tribunal case, a dispensation, or a marriage the Church already recognises. Do not assume it can be "annulled". Do not assume it cannot.

Preparation depends on the diocese and on your situation. A couple of sixty may not be sent on the same course as a couple of twenty-two. They may still be asked to sit down and talk about consent, children, and faith. That is not an insult.

If convalidation is the right remedy, you arrange the ceremony in the form that fits. Mass or not, witnesses, the simplest honest rite. Afterwards the marriage is recorded, and notice is sent to the parish of baptism so the register can be noted. If sanation is the right remedy, there may be no ceremony at all. The priest will explain what you will and will not see.

If the answer is that you are not free, stay in the conversation. Ask what is possible. Ask about Confession. Ask what the children should be told. Leaving in anger is understandable. Disappearing for another twenty years is how the question got this heavy.

One last practical thing. Procedures vary. A priest in another diocese may ask for a paper yours does not, or be able to do in a month what here takes three. That is administration. It is not a different gospel.

A last word

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If you have read this far, you have already done the part many couples postpone for years. You have looked at the question.

You do not have to arrive at the presbytery with the right vocabulary. Convalidation, sanation, disparity of cult: the priest can carry those words. You carry the dates, the baptisms, the previous marriages, and the fact that you want this put right.

The Church is not asking you to call the past a pretence. She is asking you to let Christ have the promise in the form he gave her to keep. Where that can be done, it is a quiet mercy. Where it cannot yet be done, the truth is still kinder than a date in the diary that would have to be crossed out.

Go and tell him. Take the certificates if you have them. If you do not, go anyway.

Sources and Further Reading

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This is a little book, not a commentary. The notes below are the authorities a priest can check.

Sacred Scripture

Genesis 1–2, on man and woman and the one flesh. Tobit 7–8, especially the prayer of Tobias and Sarah before they come together. John 2:1–11, the wedding at Cana. Acts 18:1–3 and 18:24–26, Aquila and Priscilla. Matthew 19:3–12 and Mark 10:2–12, on permanence. Ephesians 5:21–33, on marriage and Christ and the Church. 1 Corinthians 7, on marriage, separation and mixed households. Revelation 19:7–9, the wedding feast of the Lamb. Quotations in this book are paraphrases, not a printed translation.

Magisterium

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1601–1666, especially 1621–1632 on consent and canonical form, 1633–1637 on mixed marriages, 1643–1658 on the goods of marriage and on irregular situations, and 2382–2386. Council of Trent, session 24, Tametsi (11 November 1563), on clandestine marriage. Pius X, decree Ne Temere (1907, in force from Easter 1908). John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio (1981), especially 84. Francis, Amoris Laetitia (2016), chapter 8, read with the Catechism and Familiaris Consortio, not instead of them.

Canon law

Code of Canon Law (1983), canons 1055–1057 (covenant, sacrament, consent), 1061 (putative marriage), 1078 and 1083–1094 (impediments), 1085 (prior bond), 1086 (disparity of cult), 1108 and 1116–1117 (canonical form and who is bound), 1124–1129 (mixed marriage and dispensation from form), 1137 (legitimacy of children), 1141–1155 (separation and dissolution), 1156–1160 (simple convalidation), 1161–1165 (radical sanation). Eastern Catholics are also governed by the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches, where the priest's blessing belongs to the form of marriage. Diocesan procedures for papers, preparation and sanation vary.

Liturgy and history

The Order of Celebrating Matrimony (2016 edition in use in England and Wales) distinguishes the celebration of marriage within and outside Mass. A blessing of an already valid marriage is a different rite from the celebration of marriage itself.

Augustine, Confessions, book 9, on Monica and Patricius. Claims about Tametsi and Ne Temere follow the decrees themselves, not later retellings.

The next kitchen table

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Someone left this booklet where you could find it. That is how these little books are meant to travel: not as a course, but as the thing a priest wishes he could leave on the table after the conversation has already been long enough.

They take longer to make than they take to read. The canons have to be checked. The distinctions have to stay sharp when the sentences are kept simple. The pages have to sound like a priest talking, and then be looked at again because they didn't.

If this one helped, and you are able to help Silent Homilies make the next one, a gift through the website is a real kindness. It is not payment for these pages. They are already yours. Nothing is owed.

If you cannot give, give the booklet to a couple who are still wondering whether they are allowed to ask. That would already be a good use of it.

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